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P E R I S C O P E

Murder by Bungle

Readers who expected investigative reporter Seymour Hersh to find a plot behind the Soviet destruction of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983 are in for a surprise. Conspiracy theorists have examined the scant evidence and concluded that foul play of some sort, most likely an American intelligence operation, caused the tragedy. But in "The Target Is Destroyed" Hersh concludes the cause was incompetence.

The book, due from Random House next month, with excerpts in *The Atlantic Monthly*, shows bungling at the start when a KAL crew member punched the wrong longitude—139 degrees west instead of 149 degrees—into the plane's navigation system. The Soviets goofed, mistaking it for an American reconnaissance plane. The U.S. National Security Agency not only recorded the Su-15 pilot as he chased the airliner, its instruments listened in when the deputy regional air-defense commander phoned Moscow for instructions. Hersh faults the Reagan administration for letting the world continue to believe the Soviets knew they were firing on an unarmed airliner. But he does not believe the United States could have warned the Korean pilot. By the time the U.S. surveillance network had analyzed the intercepted com-

munications, the plane had been underwater four hours.

None of the principals will like Hersh's findings. The U.S. intelligence community won't be happy seeing some of its most secret capabilities discussed in print. The Soviets will also be disappointed. They gave Hersh access to major figures in the story, like ex-Chief of Staff Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, in hopes that Hersh's book would support their charge that KAL 007 was a spy plane. "They simply wanted me to prove what they couldn't," he says. "There was no conspiracy."